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ABSTRACT

The renaming of vocational education (VE) as career and technical education (CTE) has been motivated partly by the need to address VE's image. However, name changes go beyond concern for image. Today's CTE offers broader career pathways than did previous VE programs. After a decade of academic-vocational integration and tech prep, it is recognized that school-to-career programs are about emphasizing a dual career path that leaves the option of college open while providing students with marketable skills. Workplace changes have made technical employment the fastest growing sector of the labor market. The increasing opportunities and salaries associated with technical occupations have affected the demographics of today's CTE students, who are often in the top 5% of their high school classes. Students and the media are getting the message about CTE. Changing parents' minds may be harder, however. The following guidelines can help practitioners and administrators inform parents of the substance beneath the name change to CTE: (1) demonstrate the successful outcomes of CTE; (2) emphasize the marketability of CTE graduates; (3) cultivate the support of influential advocates; (4) be responsive to the labor market; and (5) shift the focus to postsecondary success, not postsecondary admission. (Contains 15 references.) (MN)

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# Career and Technical Education: A New Look

In Brief: Fast Facts for Policy and Practice
No. 8

Sandra Kerka

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National Dissemination Center for Career and Technical Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

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IN Brief
Fast Facts for Policy and Practice
2000 no. 8
National Dissemination Center for Career & Technical Education

by Sandra Kerka

# Career and Technical Education: A New Look

"Tin benders and wood butchers." "Stirring and stitching." "Grease monkeys." Career and technical educators are all too familiar with these stereotypes of vocational programs. But they know something that the rest of the world is slowly finding out: "Vocational education in this country is vastly different from what it was decades ago" ("Vocational Classes" 2000). What is new about career and technical education (CTE)? How can the field get parents, counselors, and students to take a closer look?

## Not Just a Name Change

First and most obvious is the nomenclature. The "V" word is being replaced not only by CTE but also school-to-career, applied technology, work force development, lifework development, and other terms. A majority of state departments and many local districts and institutions have changed their names in the last decade (Ries 1997). Individual program areas are metamorphosing: industrial arts into technology education, home economics into family and consumer sciences; shop class has disappeared and auto mechanics is known as automotive technology (Blassingame 1999; Kaggwa 2000).

Part of this name game is motivated by the need to address the image of the field. Public, especially parental, opinion persistently regards vocational education as the path for noncollege-bound students, with a narrow focus and limited opportunities (Ries 1997; Vo 1997a). A mere name change might not do the trick, anyway: respondents to an Oklahoma survey would not support school-to-work if it was another name for voc ed (Vo 1997a). However, name changes go beyond concern for image. The world of work is changing and vocational education is responding. The new names reflect a new mission and emphasis.

Today's CTE offers broader career pathways. For example, the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences prepares students for opportunities that have little to do with the traditional view of farming—jobs in agribusiness, genetic engineering, and rural sociology (Vo 1997b). Broader program offerings are focused on meeting local labor market needs: vocational programs in some areas now include wellness and fitness technology, stone carving, casino work, horsemanship, digital television production, and boat building (Hettinger 1999; Langland 1999; Ries 2000). CTE is responding to the boom in information technology (and shortage of workers) with certification for network administrators and other, highly popular certificate programs (Lozada 1999; Ries 1999).

After a decade of academic-vocational integration and tech prep, it is recognized that school-to-careers programs are "about seeing academics in a different way, in a context that interests students" (Vo 1997a, p. 22). This contextualized learning engages students who might not otherwise succeed in academic subjects while at the same time giving them a future focus and purpose for continuing education (Blassingame 1999). The new crop of career academies and magnet schools emphasize a dual career path, which leaves the option of college open while providing students with marketable skills (Bowden 1998; Langland 1999). The most successful career academies have not only made structural changes, invested resources in integration, and developed partnerships with employers and postsecondary institutions. They have also attempted to rethink the entire process of schooling (Little, Erbstein, and Walker 1996).

The dual career path is a necessity in today's world of work, which demands lifelong learning, flexibility, and continuous skill upgrading. Many types of work now require the ability to use computer technology and analytical thinking, skills needed by all regardless of their career choice ("Vocational Classes" 2000). For example, auto technicians must now be conversant with electronics theory, because "today's vehicles sport as much onboard computer technology as the Apollo 13" (Kaggwa 2000, p. 6-B).

## The New Look of CTE Students

These workplace changes have made technical employment the fastest growing sector of the labor market. Not only does this mean more opportunities, but also high-paying ones. After professions (which represent only 20% of occupations), precision/metal/craft occupations earn the highest salaries (Gray 1997). In some markets, automotive technicians can earn $40,000-50,000 (Kaggwa 2000). And entry-level information technology salaries have increased 24% in recent years (Lozada 1999).

Opportunities for challenging careers and good salaries are changing the demographics of today's CTE students. True or not, vocational education was once considered the track for low-achieving, noncollege-bound students. Now, CTE students are often in the top 5% of their high school classes (Ries 2000). Such academically rigorous programs as tech prep and High Schools that Work are attracting "the best and brightest" to vocational programs that "can give them a jump start on college and careers in an increasingly high-tech world" (ibid., p. 17). Here's a marker of how far CTE has come: in New Jersey, lawsuits have been filed on behalf of high-achieving students whose home districts have sought to prevent them from attending technical schools (ibid.).

Career academies such as Chicago Ag (Vo 1997b) and Harford Tech (Bowden 1998) are college-prep schools with burgeoning enrollments from all parts of the achievement spectrum. Philadelphia's vo-tech schools have retooled their curricula to appeal to "not just the middle-of-the-pack student but also the high-achieving college-bound youngster," while maintaining programs for special needs students (Langland 1999).



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The broader mix of the CTE student population is reflected in the winners of the All-American Vocational Student Awards. In 2000, their median grade point average was 3.35 and nearly one-half were female (12% of whom were in nontraditional career programs) ("Tools for Tomorrow" 2000). At the same time, up to 40% of family and consumer sciences students are now male, a shift attributed to changes in family dynamics (Blassingame 1999).

## Changing Hearts and Minds

Students are getting the message about CTE, and the media are too (Kaggwa 2000; Langland 1999; "Vocational Classes" 2000). Changing the minds of parents whose hearts are set on college for their kids may be the hardest job. What can CTE practitioners and administrators do to show them the substance beneath the name changes?

- **Demonstrate the successful outcomes of CTE.** School-to-career programs such as career academies are designed to meet state standards and prepare students for 2- and 4-year college as well as employment. Disseminate information about academic performance, attendance, graduation, postsecondary enrollment, and employment outcomes of CTE students. (Dembicki 1999; Gray 1997; Ries 1999)

- **Emphasize the marketability of CTE graduates.** What parent could resist this idea: "you can go to work and make more money than me and pay for your own college" (Ries 1999, p. 23)

- **Cultivate the support of influential advocates,** including successful graduates and supportive parents. (Bowden 1998; Dembicki 1999; Little et al. 1996)

- **Be responsive to the labor market.** Be proactive in identifying programs that will prepare students for current and emerging local employment needs. Phase out programs that are obsolete (Langland 1999; Ries 1999). The Automotive Youth Educational Systems program, a partnership of auto manufacturers, dealers, and vocational schools, is one example of a response to a critical shortage of skilled workers (Kaggwa 2000).

- **Successful marketers start where their audience is.** Reframe the issue of "college." Most people would agree that "the main objective is preparing students for successful lives, whether they study to work now or later" ("Vocational Classes" 2000). Shift the focus to postsecondary success, not postsecondary admission, because the hard part is graduating (Gray 1997). Stress that "students who go to college without adequate occupational focus are less likely to graduate" (p. 27).

Parents want the best for their children. If CTE can provide preparation for careers with high earnings potential and future opportunities, attitudes will change. CTE is clearly no longer your father's or mother's voc ed. Image change and innovative marketing are part of the story: Harford Tech doubled its enrollment, quadrupled the number of applicants, and reduced attrition to 2% through its promotional efforts (Bowden 1998). Marketing may bring them in, but it is the substance beneath the new look that delivers the benefits.

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CTE NATIONAL DISSEMINATION CENTER
CAREER & TECHNICAL EDUCATION
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
1900 KENNY ROAD, COLUMBUS OH 43210-1090